Micro-Nightmares

A little unpleasantness

Zero Philosophy
Nov 3, 2020

40 7

Horror epitomizes literary quality. This proposition – which will typically be judged indefensible – is foundational for what follows. However implausible, it can be floated with minimal resistance in the mode of meta-fiction. It functions here as an experimental hypothesis, supporting subsequent questions.

The brief text beginning with it submits to a guiding maxim. *In matters of the word, there is no sharpening without shortening.* Accept *the sharper the better* as a supplementary assumption, and the task is set. Guidelines are drawn. Tighten each piece, however manifold the pieces. How concise could ultimate abomination be made?

@dblbd was meant to ask this, several years ago. The account began by impersonating me, before veering off diagonally, and eventually disappearing. In typically grandiloquent and self-obsessed terms, Double-Bad had tweeted: "Unless the essence of a nightmare can be captured in a tweet, this TL deserves to die."

A 'tweet' had been 140 characters at the time. It might not be necessary to be exactly this strict. (The platform itself soon ceased to be.) Notably, however, the case later to be introduced achieves it with 63 characters to spare. There is nothing essentially extreme about the ambition.

There are various ways to envisage the problem thus introduced. It might be asked, for instance: Is it fundamentally about names? A focus upon invocation leads in that direction. There is much of interest to be discovered this way, in time. Names are especially suited to the function of semiotic micro-compressors. In no other type of linguistic sign can the amount of work per letter be comparably optimized. Any non-generic name touches upon the infinitudes of singularity. Names, too, can be horrifying.

Yet alternative approaches have stronger precedence. Fredric Brown set the standard in 1948, with *Knock*, based on an idea (of lower compression) by Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Brown introduced his story with a complete micro-narrative. It runs to seventeen words in total.

"The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door ..."

The perfection of these sentences blots out thought. Every linguistic particle is exactly necessary.

There are no names beside that of the Earth. No exotic names at all, then. There are not even long or uncommon words of any kind. A striking simplicity is attained.

Brown's example suggests something like an idea comes first. What is concise, at the beginning, is the *scenario*. There is a situation, and then something happens. That's all. The task offers space for no more. The question, rather, is whether it might host still less. Is a story stripped back to two sentences further compressible?

To work this way calls for an austere economy of indications. Scarcely anything is given. The dark mass is suggested. Inference bears its momentum.

What knocks? It can only be something that is no man, we have been told. So it is made evident – and this is roughly the whole of what is made evident – that an encounter with the inhuman is impending. The unknown is framed, but not filled in. Its negative characterization predominates (it is no man). Its sole positive characteristic is that *it knocks*. In this, it mimics a man, whether incidentally or strategically. It does what only a man would, though it is not one.

We are not to be shown more. Ellipsis suspends the coming event. A broken sentence introduces the unimaginable. Consummate horror is reached.

It wants to come in, or at least requests invitation. In this moment of politeness, potential terror is transmuted into horror. That is to say, shocking violence is not involved, but instead something uncanny. Threat is elevated further into the unknown.

For even the most insensate violence is *imaginable*. This request for admission, in contrast, *makes no sense*. Merely to ask "What does it want?" is to presume too much. Perhaps even "it" presumes too much. If, in the end, *too much will inescapably have been presumed*, there is a passage into cognitive crisis – which is horror itself.

Something like an archetypal horror narrative completes itself in these few words. Every element of *alien, imitative, intrusion* is sketched, in suspense. Despite the radical concision, nothing is missed.

Some complications suggest themselves, lengthening the thread. For instance, suspense takes time. It would surely not be unreasonable to assume that the length of a narrative was roughly proportional to its potential tension. There are things – including horrible things – that cannot be done quickly. This, though, beside a brief qabbalistic appendix, is done now.

Some Numbers of *Knock*

Ten plus seven, thirty-two plus twenty-three, are the pieces of most elementary arithmetic, counting words, then tallying letters.

Alphanomically, *man* counts as 55. Proceeding with the same numerical method, this 5 + 5 echoes the fingers, or digits, which make him a decimal animal. The model for incongruent counterparts is found at hand.

Fifty-five is broken here by an asymmetric mirror (32 + 23). Thus the miniature tale is retold in numbers. Man includes what should be his self-reflection, but is not. Such subtle non-correspondences capture an essential horror.

By coincidence I encountered *Numbers* 32:23 in a Bernard Cornwell novel this week. *But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out*. Perhaps it should tell me more than it seems to.

7 Comments

Write a comment...

(((:):))(:):::: Nov 3, 2020

Tendencies towards density as eventual progression towards intensity broadly as outlined here are a topic of interest -- as in J. Smart, cities, horror... (After all, intensity = density * velocity.) Recently interested in application of this to gematria -- the GoN is appealing here in its introduction of negative values, leaving it well equipped to deal with larger and larger inputs, but sorting through that blitz quickly collapses into (perceived) randomness. Smaller numbers are perhaps more useful (as in AZ, AO, & QQ gematrias -- 0 through 9 (you know it makes senselessness) or less usefully 1 through 10), as while they scale, larger sentences are often still equivalent to single words (far more so than in AQ), and appealing in their relation to decimal numeracy...

(What's a "topic"?) Anyway, it's blizzard o'clock, which'll perhaps come closer to addressing it...

MICRO-NIGHTMARES = AQ-307 = RAPID-FIRE REALISM (| = AZ-82 = WILLIAM BURROUGHS).

A LITTLE UNPLEASANTNESS = AQ-448 = (| AO-70 (= BETWEEN REAL AND PRETEND) & AZ-70 (= HYPERSTITION)).

HORROR EPITOMIZES LITERARY QUALITY = AO-139 = TURNING NOTHING INTO SOMETHING = WHEN A FIRE IN A ROOM BECOMES A ROOM ON FIRE.

META-FICTION = AQ-214 = HORRORISM = ACCELERATION.

IN MATTERS OF THE WORD, THERE IS NO SHARPENING WITHOUT SHORTENING = GoN1-54 = PUREST ANCIENT MAGIC = INVISIBLE HAND... & =...

THE SHARPER THE BETTER = GoN1-54 (| AQ-392 = ECONOMIC RATIONALITY = IN THE EYE OF THE STORM).

ULTIMATE ABOMINATION = AQ-385 = FREE MARKET CAPITALISM.

NAMES = AQ-97 = EARTH (hence its singular inclusion) = DEVIL = ALTAR.

Expand full comment

♡ 5 Reply Collapse

Queen of The Wilis Nov 3, 2020

"The Last Man"=17=359=KATAK IS SOON TO COME

and Ive just scared the living fuck out of myself with the rest of the numbers in AQ

astonishment

♡ 5 Reply Collapse

1 reply

5 more comments...

© 2023 Zero Philosophy · Privacy · Terms · Collection notice
Substack is the home for great writing